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## **GOP lawmakers target competition for rare earths**

By Lou Kilzer,  
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Three congressional Republicans came out swinging on Wednesday against what they say is excessive red tape keeping the United States from competing globally for strategic rare-earth materials.

While emphasizing they don't want to abandon environmental controls, the trio predicted that bills they are sponsoring to help clear the way for America's rare-earth industry will attract a rare show of bipartisan support in this legislative session.

The situation is "absolutely critical," Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, said during the first national rare-earth conference sponsored by the [National Center for Policy Analysis](#) in Washington. The United States is totally dependent on foreign sources for 18 vital minerals, including rare-earth elements, which are considered collectively as only one of those minerals, she noted.

Rare-earth elements are used in hybrid cars, precision munitions and other military uses, wind turbines, flat-panel televisions and computer monitors, and smartphones and other high-tech equipment.

Murkowski took aim at the Environmental Protection Agency for hindering rare-earth mining in the United States, calling its proposed regulations a "train wreck."

Murkowski and Reps. Mike Coffman and Doug Lamborn, both R-Colo., have sponsored bills during this legislative session in support of the domestic rare-earth industry, including seeking a national study of the inventory of such materials and ensuring the military can get the materials it needs to carry out its mission.

Coffman joined industry and academic attendees in blasting China for artificially creating critical shortages of rare earths. China, which produces more than 97 percent of the world's rare earths, sharply reduced rare-earth exports last year and for a short time embargoed shipments to Japan. The Chinese also have temporarily shut down production at their largest rare-earth mine -- admittedly to drive up prices to levels they believe are appropriate.

"China is not a good trading partner," Coffman said.

Peter Dent, vice president of Electron Energy Corp., a Lancaster County firm that makes critical magnets using rare-earth materials, was even more critical. If oil-producing countries had acted to withhold supplies the way China did last year with rare earths, he said, Americans would be asking, "Where's the fleet?"

Dent said China did so to "squeeze companies to relocate manufacturing to China," a long-term goal of the People's Republic leadership.

Coffman has pressed the Department of Defense to publicly acknowledge that many of its key weapons systems have become dependent on the willingness of China to deliver rare-earth magnets and other rare-earth products.

"Our backs are against the wall," said Jeff Green, president of J.A. Green & Co., a firm that has represented American magnet manufacturers. Not only did the United States surrender rare-earth materials production to China in the early 2000s, he said, but the nation also lost the technology and expertise to make certain key products.

China's actions have set off an explosion in exploration for rare earths in other countries, but major production is expected soon only at mines in California and Australia. The problem is that those mines produce mostly "light rare earths," not the "heavy rare earths" that are the most sought, experts say.